

CHAPTER VI.

The Choroti (6). Family Life and Social Organization.
Superstition. Illness and Death.

Marriage customs. Division of labour. Chiefs. Medicine men. Belief in evil spirits. Magic means of protection. Illness. Exorcism. Fairy darts. Physical therapeutics. Death. Burial. Belief in a future existence.

A Choroti man, as a rule, has only one wife, but among the part of 595 the tribe that has been in close intercourse with the Chiriguano, it is not an uncommon thing for the chiefs to possess several wives, as, for instance, the chief of the Choroti Indians living in the neighbourhood of Tatarenda (close on the border of the Chiriguano country), who had no less than three spouses. In fig. 178 is seen this chief holding one of his sons by the hand; to the left of the boy there is the chief's 'number-one' wife, grown old and ugly, and on the man's right is his second wife, the mother of the boy. His third wife, who is not included in the picture, was quite a young girl.

Among the Choroti it is the women who take the initiative in amor- 832
ous relations. As a rule, this is done at dances which take place in seasons when food is abundant, and the Indians accordingly find it fitting to dance and amuse themselves. In his book 'Indianliv', Nordenskiöld has given a very vivid description of such nocturnal mating dances, and in the preceding chapter I have (pp. 149, 150) quoted from him.

When a girl has reached mature age, she enters into free and un- 836
restricted relations with now one, now another, of the men, but finally she finds for herself a partner for life (see fig. 179). Having once taken this step, she usually keeps faithful to her husband. If a Choroti girl should happen to become pregnant, she sets about procuring abortion, and in 147
that way she as a rule avoids having any children before becoming a

14. — v. Kruze, II.

wife.

[p. 159]

arrived at this plantation to look for work. Led by their chiefs, they had⁶⁴² made the long journey from the region of their homes. The chiefs, some⁵⁵⁴ of whom had met us in the Chaco, whilst others had only heard of us, wished to pay us a call. Personally I do not possess any notes about this reception, but I have come across some in Fries' diary. He thus refers to the incident: 'When the Choroti Indians, whom we knew from Tatarenda and who were now working here, saw us, they came, almost to a man, and greeted us, being evidently very glad to meet us again. *The principal chief, at the head of all the lesser caziques, was among those who came and paid us their respects.*'¹

A favoured position in the village community is that held by the medicine⁷⁵⁶ men; for their services they are rewarded by a — from a Choroti point⁵⁵⁴ of view — generous remuneration in the form of food and drink. That among the Choroti the medicine men are held in great esteem, and that everybody is anxious to be on good terms with them, appears only natural to anyone with a knowledge of what an important part magical conceptions play with these Indians. It is largely by the Finlander explorer, Rafael Karsten — oft-quoted in the present work — that ethnological¹¹⁴⁷ science has been enriched by information and detailed reports on the magical customs and practices of the Choroti, as well as of other Chaco tribes.²

The Choroti Indians believe that man, all his life through, is more or⁷⁷⁶ less subject to influences from spirits, who, on the whole, are of a harmful nature. Especial danger is to be apprehended from spirits on certain occasions such as child-birth, pubescence and death. Usually the evil is worked by a spirit, 'mohsek', entering a person through one of the orifices of his body and thereby assuming possession of him. If at birth a child is deformed or very sickly, it is supposed to be possessed by some⁸⁴⁷ evil 'moshek', and is on that account killed.³ When a girl has attained the age of puberty, during the first critical, time she must keep a covering⁹⁸¹ over her head, so that no evil spirit may be able to enter her body by way of her nose, mouth, eyes or ears.⁴ The occasion of a girl attaining puberty is celebrated with a dance which undoubtedly is of a magical

Character.

¹ Professor Robert Fries: diary, X, p. 14. Italics by von Rosen.

² See Bibliography attached.

³ Karsten (4), p. 176.

⁴ Karsten (4), p. 165.

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 562 are due -- at least in part -- to geographical causes. As to the Choroti,
 it is to be noticed that among them the women in general have great
 social importance, to such an extent in fact, that we may speak of a real
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 [162] gynaeocracy. This is in the first place due to the numerical disproportion
 between the sexes which, at least at present, exists in this tribe.
 The causes of this phenomenon are difficult to assign; there is for instance,
 no general custom of killing new-born female children which would account
 for it. Infanticide is indeed practised in the case of monstrous
 children and twins, but it has reference to male children as well as to
 female. Female children are appreciated perhaps more than male children,
 for the very reason that women are so few in the Choroti society.
 Whatever the real cause of the numerical paucity of the women, it
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 562 is this fact which explains their social influence. Besides this, we have
 462 to take into consideration the strict division of labour between the sexes
 existing among the Indians. For instance, sowing and planting, the carrying
 591 of fuel, the gathering of wild fruits, the brewing of intoxicating drinks,
 583 and a good deal of other home industries are wholly or chiefly incumbent
 on the women. This to the Indians means that no man *can* successfully
 do work which custom prescribes shall be done by a woman. A consequence
 of this is that particular importance is ascribed to female work
 as such and that women in general are held in great esteem. From this
 point of view we must also explain the custom that a man who marries
 must go and live with his wife's family. It is mainly due to the reluctance
 of her parents to separate from her on account of the work she performs.
 Among the Choroti no compensation is given for a bride, because no
 bargaining of any kind whatever takes place between the members of
 the tribes. Instead of that, custom prescribes that the young husband
 shall render services to her parents, which is only possible if he stays with
 the family of his spouse for a longer or shorter time. In this way matrilo-
 cal marriage in the Choroti and other Chaco tribes seems to me to
 have originated, although the Choroti at any rate are not now aware of
 these services being really obligatory and a form of compensation for the
 wife. Marriage among them appears now as a wholly private affair based
 upon the voluntary agreement of both parties. But where a matrilo-
 cal marriage has developed, the children are naturally looked upon as belong-
 ing in the first place to the mother and to her tribe or clan, whereas the
 husband's importance as a family father is only secondary.

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 562 The same kind of «mother-right» and gynaeocracy also prevails, or
 584 prevailed formerly, among the *Mataco* Indians who, for instance, allow